

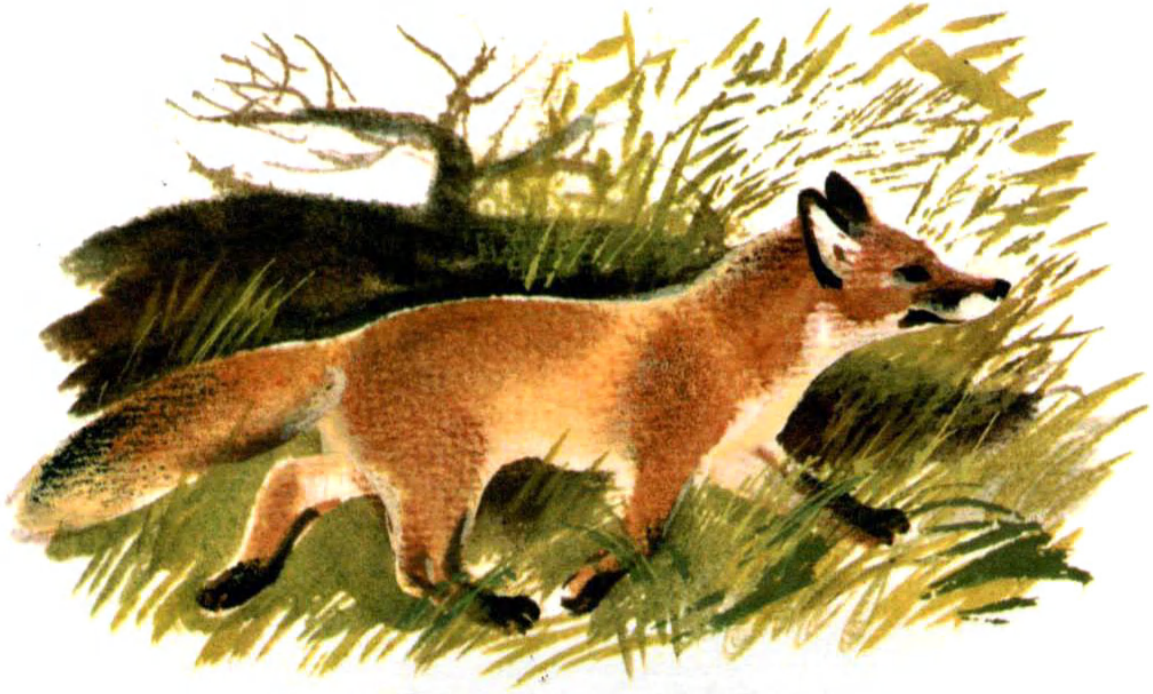


Igor Akimushkin

THERE WAS ONCE A FOX

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It was spring. Deep in a pine wood was a clearing with a small mound in the middle. There was a burrow under the mound, and in the burrow lived a family of newborn fox cubs. Their coats were dun, and the tips of their tails were white. These little white “tags” were all that set them apart from newborn wolf cubs, for in every other way they were alike.

The fox cubs were still blind. They crept towards their mother’s warm body, pressed close to her and sucked her warm milk.

When the cubs were two weeks old, their eyes opened. They looked around and saw the inside of their burrow for the very first time. But twenty more days were to pass before they followed their mother up the narrow passage, creeping awkwardly behind her.

Once above ground, they were so dazzled by the bright sunlight that they sat back on their haunches in surprise. The boldest cub tried to take a few unsteady steps, but stopped short at the sight of something inching along underfoot. It was a big, shiny ground beetle. The cub bravely brought its paw down on the beetle, but felt the beetle’s squirming legs beneath its pad and quickly drew its paw away.

The beetle continued on its way, but now the cub was right behind it. It pounced and brought its front paws down on it. Then the other cubs decided to join in the game. They jostled one another and tumbled about in excitement until finally all that was left of the beetle were some bits and scraps.

Time passed quickly. Each day the cubs learnt something new, though they never ventured very far from their burrow. Any unfamiliar sound would send them scampering down the dark passage to safety. However, as it was no fun being cooped up underground, soon one pointed little muzzle would peep out of the burrow entrance, and then another. They would prick up their ears to catch the slightest sound, and if all was still, they would come out into the sunlight again.

When the cubs were a bit older, their mother brought them a live mouse. What a commotion that caused! At first, they were terrified by



the strange beast and sprang back from it in alarm. Then they all fell on it at once, rolling it, nipping it and tossing it into the air, but not one of them thought it edible.

The mother fox picked up the dead mouse, crushed it between her teeth and laid it on the ground for her cubs. They all fell on it once again, and in the confusion one of them gulped it down. From that day on, the cubs took to eating mice.

There are three species of foxes in the Soviet Union.

The common red fox, which is to be found everywhere; the corsak, which lives in Central Asia, the lower reaches of the Volga and the Trans-Baikal region; and the Afghan fox, which inhabits Turkmenia, the southernmost part of the USSR.

The corsak is a small species, with a body only 50 centimetres long, and a 30-centimetre tail with a black tip.

The corsak will never settle in a field, forest, or meadow. It prefers the hilly semi-desert sparsely covered with bushes. It spends the day sleeping in an abandoned badger or marmot burrow, and by night it prowls about, searching for prey. It hunts all sorts of small rodents: mice, field-voles, hamsters, and gophers. It will even eat a hedgehog if it manages to find one.

The Afghan fox is even smaller than the corsak. Its tail-tip is also black, but the dark markings under its eyes distinguish it from the corsak. The Afghan fox is a very rare animal, and little is known of its habits.

The red fox prefers copses, glades and steppeland to dense forests.







Summer and winter, the red fox sets out into the fields to hunt mice. It will cock its head amusingly, now to one side, now to the other, listening closely for the tiniest squeak under the snow, the leaves or the ground, and for the tiniest rustling sound. When it spots a mouse, it leaps up into the air and comes down with all four paws pressed closely together. Then it begins digging frenziedly. It is so intent and excited then that one can come up quite close without its even noticing that.

Mice and field-voles make up the better part of a fox's diet. However, a lucky fox will even hunt down a hare, a wild goose or a wood-grouse. And, of course, everyone knows what excellent chicken-thieves foxes are.

Wolves, jackals and dogs are the fox's closest relatives. The fox differs from them in that it never lives or hunts in a pack, but only singly. In this, it very much resembles the cat family. And, like cats, foxes have elongated pupils.

Foxes can be found in Europe, Asia, Africa and North America.

There are many tall tales about foxes. According to some, a fox can fish with its tail. Others will have the fox "playing dead" when danger





threatens, so that it supposedly will not even stir if it is picked up by the tail and dropped into a sack.

But there is something the fox really does that is amazing. If it is fleeing from dogs, or if it just wants to have a nap where it will be out of danger, it will sometimes climb a tree! And not only an inclined trunk, which would not be too difficult to do, but also a straight-standing fir-tree. However, the lower branches must be very close to the ground for the fox to be able to leap onto them. There it hangs by its front paws, gets a foothold with its hind paws and clambers higher.

As autumn approached, the family of half-grown fox cubs left their home and ventured out into the world. That first autumn none, save one, went very far. They all stayed within five kilometres from their burrow. But one little fox set out on a most unusual journey that took her on and on, across glades and copses, until she came to a spot a full one hundred kilometres from her burrow. This happens very rarely, indeed.

The leaves had fallen by the time the young fox found a home that suited her. It was a badger's burrow that was quite fit to live in. The underground passage forked and branched out, and had a dozen entrances and exits. Deep underground the badger had curled into a ball and partitioned itself off with earthen walls. It would sleep there all through the cold winter months.

The young fox did not disturb the badger. She took up residence in a chamber that led off from one of the passages and was closer to the surface. And so the two of them shared a home that winter.

As foxes do not hibernate, she would venture out in search of her favourite mice or field-voles, and if she was lucky, she would have a hazel-hen or black grouse for dinner.

Then it was spring again, and summer. The fox grew up and now had a family of her own in a burrow of her own, and so we end our story where we began it—with a new family of fox cubs.







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